Sports, Gambling, and Government:
America's First Social Compact?

The presence of a 3,600-year-old ballcourt in the Mazatan region of Southern Mexico implies that a significant connection existed between ballcourts, competitive sport, and the emergence of the first ascriptive societies in Mesoamerica. We explore four likely connections between the Mesoamerican ballgame, rank society, and early government. These include gambling, playing the game, sponsorship of the game and its associated activities, and the effects of team sports on community identity. Ethnographic information from tribal societies is reviewed with respect to the social roles of competitive games and their effects on egalitarian society. We consider the idea that community identity, or communitas, can become embodied in a small group of people or individuals who sponsor sport, its associated rituals, and the construction of sporting facilities. These individuals may subsequently gain higher status within both their communities and their regions. This finding adds sport and competitive gaming to the growing list of processes that anthropologists should consider in exploring social transformations. [Mesoamerica, social complexity, ballgames, community identity]

Enlightenment philosophers got it wrong; pleasure rather than hardship was the downhill slope leading to primitive government. The earliest, clear evidence for government in the Americas, for example, implicates ritual drinking, feasting, gambling, competitive team sports, and other proffered entertainments in the primary governmental process, with war and her sister deprivations nowhere to be seen. We have discussed some of this evidence from southern Mexico elsewhere (Blake and Clark 1999; Clark 1994, 1997; Clark and Blake 1994) and so will restrict attention here to possible connections between sports and government—an improbable possibility only recently suggested by discovery of a 3,600-year-old ballcourt. Both the ballcourt’s location and date constitute strong circumstantial evidence that its construction and/or use was important in and for the development of hereditary inequality and formal ascriptive leadership. Data from later Mesoamerican civilizations further add to the circumstantial case that the ballgame played a notable role in the origins and perpetuation of the first formal community governments in Mesoamerica and, hence, the Americas. We explore here connections between this competitive sport, its collateral competitive activities such as gambling, and the origins of government. By government we mean formal, community leadership recruited by ascription or, in short, the type of hereditary rulership typical of chiefdom societies.

In the following discussion we address possible significant associations between competitive games and the emergence of ascribed leadership positions and social ranks. We still do not have many answers, but we hope to raise important questions and provide some plausible possibilities for connections between the two. We first outline the circumstantial case for a connection between the Mesoamerican ballgame and the emergence of simple chiefdoms in the Mazatan region of southern Mexico. After a brief description of the archaeological evidence of principal interest, and an overview of the Mesoamerican ballgame as understood in late time periods, we explore four likely connections between the game and early government. We consider a range of ethnographic information from American tribal societies in trying to understand the social roles of competitive games and their possible deleterious effects on egalitarian social structures. If there was indeed a significant relationship between playing the ballgame and the emergence of heritable political power and government in early Mesoamerica, the logical possibilities are that it concerned either the primary activity of the game itself or the activities surrounding the game. We examine each in turn. In the final section we consider the contribution of team sports in the forging of community identity, or communitas, and the coalescence of community leadership around individual leaders.
The Ballgame and Mesoamerica's First Governments

By all accounts, the transition from egalitarian to complex societies in Mesoamerica was a torrid affair. After millennia of hunting, fishing, and gathering, by the second millennium B.C. people started to settle down and devote more time to horticulture and agriculture. Shortly thereafter, the first simple chiefdom societies arose (about 1600 B.C. in calibrated radiocarbon years) in the Pacific coastal lowlands of southern Mexico, and just three or four centuries later, there were state societies in the Gulf Coast lowlands (see Clark 1997 for summary). Fine points of the developmental sequence are arguable but not the overall sequence. Chiefdom and state societies first emerged in the lowland tropics of southern Mexico among cultures known as the Mokaya and the Olmec and later spread to the Mexican highlands and the Maya lowlands. Although there appears to be a clear link between early Mokaya and later Olmec developments, extant evidence is insufficient to trace its lineaments. For present purposes, however, it is sufficient to note that the Olmec developed the first state society in Mesoamerica (Cyphers 1996), and presumably in the Americas, and that the Mokaya were an earlier and less complex culture (Clark and Blake 1994). The Olmecs are best known for their monumental and dynamic stone sculptures of paramount chiefs and/or kings, a point that will become relevant below (Figure 1).

The emphasis of our joint research over the past decade has been on the development of what may have been the first simple chiefdom societies in Mesoamerica, and possibly America, first evident among the Mokaya of coastal Chiapas (Clark 1994). The archaeological record of this coastal zone brackets the transition from egalitarian to rank society and provides the best evidence of this critical process currently available for Mesoamerica. Clark and Blake (1994) argue that the emergence of hereditary social distinctions resulted from the favorable combination of special social circumstances in a productive environment that could sustain social competition. They argue that the natural abundance of the Mazatan region allowed some individuals, denoted as "aggrandizers," to accumulate social surpluses and to compete for local renown and followers, principally by sponsoring feasts, local exchanges, and craft activities, which set up a system of social debts between aggrandizers and their obligated clients (Clark and Blake 1994; see also Hayden and Gargett 1990 for a discussion of "accumulators"). This competitive social milieu promoted individual searches for innovations that could serve in outshining one's rivals in social displays. Some innovations included bringing in cultigens (corn and beans) from the highlands and ceramic technology from regions to the south (Clark and Blake 1994; Clark and Gosser 1995). The ballgame may have been another such borrowed innovation. The transition to hereditary inequality is thought to have occurred because several aggrandizers were able to sustain their prestige over the long run and to pass on benefits to heirs. The social circumstance of habitual privilege accorded to the same household or lineage heads was the basis for the institutionalization of hereditary rank distinctions.

Archaeologically, we place the transition to simple chiefdoms at about 1600 B.C. (see Blake et al. 1995 for details of chronology). The best evidence for its emergence is the coordinated construction history of special house platforms at the large village of Paso de la Amada (Figure 2). There is good evidence that prior to 1600 B.C. each ward of this extensive village had at least one big house, presumably of a lineage leader or headman (Clark 1994). But only one of these houses (Mound 6) was subsequently rebuilt and expanded over the course of many generations (Figure 3); the others were abandoned. This suggests that the lineage head of one household was successful in bringing the entire village under his leadership and that this centralizing leadership continued to be passed down within the same household and lineage afterwards. The chiefly residence at Mound 6 was rebuilt and elevated at least seven times over the next three centuries and appears to have been the principal residence in the community during all that time (Blake 1991; Clark 1994). The history of this household, and its supposed lineage of petty chiefs, is of particular

Figure 1. "El Rey" or "The King," the largest of the colossal stone heads carved by the San Lorenzo Olmec.
interest because the fine chronology of its successive modifications allows us to narrow the time frame for the origins of hereditary village leadership to about 1600 B.C. As it turns out, the ballcourt discovered close by this chiefly residence was constructed just prior to the emergence of rank (Hill et al. 1998). These construction histories lead to our primary and strongest suspicion of a link between the ballcourt/ballgame and the emergence of hereditary leadership.

At the time of the construction of the ballcourt, the soon-to-be-chiefly residence at Mound 6 was still a pole and thatch structure built at ground level, and it appears to have been similar to other big houses in the village. Subsequently, the Mound 6 household built a broad basal platform and elevated their residence several feet. This is the first clear indication of social distinctions at Paso de la Amada (Figure 4). The proximity of the ballcourt to Mound 6 suggests to us that the residents there may have played a major role in constructing the ballcourt and in administrating its use. The ballcourt was built atop an elongated, compacted surface that may have served as an open playing field prior to construction of the formal playing court. Although rather modest by later standards, the Paso de la Amada ballcourt is the largest construction known for its time in Mesoamerica (Hill et al. 1998). It consists of two parallel, linear mounds bracketing a narrow playing alley. The alley is 80 m long, and the flanking mounds are each 1.5 m high, 30 m wide, and 80 m long (Figure 5). By our calculations, at least 1,375 person-days of labor went into making this earthen structure. Three significant questions arise from our reconstruction of the varied history of domestic and public structures at Paso de la Amada. Did the household at Mound 6 sponsor the construction and use of the ballcourt? If so, was this the critical difference in competition among lineage leaders that finally led to the emergence of hereditary leadership? If so, in what way might the construction or use of this ballcourt have been important? We explore these questions below.

The second piece of circumstantial evidence for connecting formal games and government comes from later developments in Mesoamerica. We consider it significant that the earliest representations of leaders among the Olmec
about 1200 B.C. depict them in ballplaying gear. The famous multi-ton stone heads depict kings and/or high chiefs sporting leather helmets (Figure 6). Of equal significance, clay figurines of elites in other contemporaneous societies in the Mexican highlands depict them in ballplaying gear as well (Figure 7). The depicted helmets, heavy clothing, and padding were necessary protection from the solid rubber balls used in the game (see below). Why were early leaders portrayed as ballplayers? In later Mesoamerica, the ballgame had clear ritual and cosmological significance and was a key element in governance (see contributions in Scarborough and Wilcox 1991). It is of more than passing interest that the principal creation story of the Maya, recorded in the Popul Vuh, centers on the ballgame and sports contests between mortals and gods (Tedlock 1985). Civilization was believed, at least allegorically, to have derived from mortals playing ball and besting underworld gods in a contest to the death. The ballgame provided a means of unifying "the social and ideological fabric of a complex society" (Scarborough 1991:130). Although it is clear that the ballgame was important for governing within later societies, it does not follow that it was necessarily critical in the first emergence of complex society or government, but it may have been. For the past several years we have been investigating this possibility. Our investigation has required familiarity with the rules of the game and its associated activities.

The Mesoamerican Ballgame

At least five different games involving competitive play with a hard rubber ball are recorded for ancient Mesoamerica. Archaeological evidence traces some of these back at least to Late Archaic times (around 2000 B.C.). Variants of the game included versions of (1) handball, (2) stickball, (3) hipball, (4) kickball, and (5) "trick" games similar to the "keep-away" games played by children today (see Borhegyi 1980 and Stern 1950 for descriptions). As with today’s sports, the different games were probably easily identified by the type of ball, bat or other equipment, and arena used. Some of the Mesoamerican games required different sized balls, with the hipgame requiring the largest and heaviest ones. We do not know whether all variants of the ballgame were played in ancient Mazatan, the region of our principal interest, but we are confident that hipball was played because it is the only one of the five requiring a formal court such as that constructed at Paso de la Amada. Ethnohistoric sources further suggest that the hipgame was the most important, frequent, and competitive of the five ballgames (Leyenaar 1978:42). We focus
on this variant here because it qualifies as a true sport and not just as play. We follow Edwards (1973:55) in distin-
guishing sports from play; by sport we mean a competitive activity with formal rules where the outcome extends
beyond the players to individuals and groups who do not par-
ticipate directly in the activity.

The hip game (hereafter the "ballgame") was played on a
formal court consisting of a long, narrow playing alley that
opened up at each end into an end zone. Anciently, ball-
courts varied in length and width, but all possessed the
same essential features: two lateral walls or platforms, gen-
tle sloping "benches," and a central alley (Figure 8). The
walls and benches figured prominently in keeping the ball
in play and were used much like walls of a modern squash
court. The game was played with two opposing teams,
each of which defended an end zone. The number of play-
ers per team varied according to the game and its purpose.
Much like modern soccer or football, the objective of the
ballgame was to drive the ball past one's opponent into
their end zone. This required great skill and physical condi-
tioning because the players had to do this without using
their hands or feet; the ball was kept in play by hitting it
with one's hips, thus the designation for this game.

The ballgame was scored using different point systems.
Early post-Spanish Conquest documents recount that the
number of points needed to win a particular game was ne-
gotiated beforehand, and it is clear from these documents
that the objective of the ballgame was to score points. In
the case of the Aztec hip ball game known as ulama, there
were three ways to win a point: (1) by driving the ball past
the opposing team's goal line, located at the beginning of
their end zone, (2) by forcing an opponent to commit a
body fault, or (3) by hitting the ball into one of the side-
arms of the end zone so it could not be returned (Stern
1950:59).

As sporting arenas, Mesoamerican ballcourts varied
widely. The largest of these was the great ballcourt at
Chichén Itzá, Yucatan, measuring 150 by 50 m. The best
measure of ballcourt variation is alley width, which ranged
from 3.6 to 12.4 m for Aztec ballcourts of Central Mexico.
Alley width and length determined the number of players
that could be accommodated in the court. In ulama, teams
of two to three players were common (Stern 1950:58). Oc-
casionally, games of one-on-one also took place; nobles
are the only ones recorded as having engaged in these spe-
cial contests.
Ethnohistoric sources indicate that Mesoamerican ballcourts also doubled as stadiums, with spectators crowding together atop the lateral walls and outside of end zones to watch these contests. In some instances, special structures for elite patrons were constructed on top of the platforms. Sweat baths and other outbuildings were often built near ballcourts and were sometimes attached to the courts themselves. More frequently, ballcourts in large cities were centrally placed near palaces, temples, and central plazas, thereby underscoring their importance.

All lines of evidence indicate that ballgames were violent and dangerous affairs. Necessary protective gear included helmets, knee pads, thick gloves, arm-wraps, chest protectors, and deerskin yokes for the hips. The solid-rubber balls weighed from 0.5 to 7.0 kg and could inflict serious injury; in fact, some athletes even died from heavy blows incurred (Durán 1971:316). During play, players aggressively jockeyed for position, sometimes knocking down teammates and opponents in the process.

As with all organized sports, winning was held in high regard, but little was gained merely by being victorious—contestants had to wager large stakes in order to profit from their triumphs. Players appear to have separated their wagers (wealth and income) from their standings as athletes (social prestige), but both were tied to winning. In one example, an Aztec noble, Xihuitlémoc, was taunted into competing in a ballgame by his rival, Axayacatl. Both players staked the rulership of their respective communities on the outcome of the match. Xihuitlémoc defeated his upstart rival and remarked that he was bothered “not so much [by] the income but the credit and standing as a player, on which he prided himself” (Torquemada 1975:250). In another contest, nominal stakes were used to emphasize the athletic prowess of an aging noble. He wagered his entire kingdom but only asked a counter bet of three turkeys from his challenger. This match was played to test the veracity of a prophesy, the outcome of which was validated by a victory (Torquemada 1975:291–292).

In terms of material gain, winning players were entitled to the cloaks and jewels of spectators, but only if they won outright by putting the ball through a vertically mounted hoop on the side of the court (Stern 1950:60). Opinions differ on this entitlement; one famous account states that winners were only due the capes of spectators who backed the losing team (Motolinia 1903:339). There is ample evidence to suggest that “professional” or full-time ballplayers were of noble rank but were not necessarily wealthy, and they often lost wealth gained in previous contests. In short, the consequences of winning were proportional to the stakes wagered, astute betting, and luck. The prestige value of winning was great but, unless parlayed into a larger fortune, was soon lost the same way it was gained. It is noteworthy that none of the ethnohistoric documents or pre-Columbian codices records any famous ballplayers.

More is known about losing than winning. As with winning, consequences of losing were tied to the stakes wagered. In extreme cases, losers forfeited their lives. The losers described in ethnohistoric accounts appear to be gamblers and not the players themselves. A passage from one of the first generation priests in the New World, Diego Durán (1971:318), illustrates how much was at stake in some wagers.

These wretches played for stakes of little value or worth, and since the pauper loses quickly what he has, they were forced
to gamble their homes, their fields, their corn granaries, their maguey plants. They sold their children in order to bet and even staked themselves and became slaves, to be sacrificed later if they were not ransomed in the manner which has been explained.

—Their way of using themselves as stakes was this. Once they had lost their valuable articles such as pieces of cloth, beads, feathers, they would give their word saying that at home they had certain valuable articles. If this was believed, it was well, but if not, the winner would accompany [the loser] to his house and take the articles which [the loser] had offered upon his word. But if he did not possess them or find a way to make payment, he was sent to jail; and if his wife or children did not ransom him, he became a slave of the creditor. The laws of the republic permitted that he could be sold for the sum he owed and not for more. In case he wished to become free and if he discovered that he was unable to gather the sum

for which he was enslaved, he lost [his liberty] if someone else could pay more. The same was applied to all the other games. This created fear and held back many who took warning in the example of others and did not bet that which they did not possess, in case the opponent took advantage of this and won [him]. As I have said, these were always people of the lower orders, because illustrious, noble people never lacked that with which to gamble. [The latter], however, played more for recreation and relief from their constant warfare and toil—not for profit.

—This is an advantage of the rich: if they lose today, with what they have left they can win tomorrow. It is important that one who takes part in this sort of game have large wealth behind him.

Significantly, carved ballcourt panels and sculpture depict human sacrifice and decapitation, although it is not clear whether the losers were dispatched (but this is our presumption). Whichever the case, human sacrifice was integral to the ballgame in Classic times. While the antiquity of ballgame sacrifice remains unknown, such practices may well date back to the Early Formative Olmec about 1100 B.C. (see Taube 1996). Human sacrifice demonstrates some immediate, tangible benefits from winning ball-games and that stakes for some contests could not be higher.

Tangential to the ballgame, but equally important, was the gambling and feasting accompanying each match. These more informal competitions co-occurred alongside games and provided numerous opportunities for forcing one’s competitors into debt. Sixteenth-century sources relate that fortunes were won and squandered at the ballcourt (Durán 1971; Torquemada 1975), the ancient equivalent to craps tables. The same accounts record that some individuals wagered on credit, offering their wives, children, property, or even personal servitude as collateral. The exploitation of
such situations by self-aggrandizing individuals is not difficult to imagine.

Feasting was also an activity associated with ballgames, with the ballcourts doubling as feasting facilities (Fox 1994). Extant archaeological evidence for ballcourt feasts, however, remains equivocal because the messes generated during such events were cleaned up, thereby leaving behind few material traces. The combination of ballgames, ballcourts, gambling, and feasts provided an easy means for creating debtors by the dozen. Such a combination would have, in our estimation, permitted creditors and others to forge debt alliances and to promote their own greater renown. In Early Formative Mazatlan, such debt creation and manipulation by aggrandizers may have been one of the principal means by which egalitarian social structures succumbed to a system of rank about 1600 B.C.

Aggrandizers, Ballgames, and Heritable Privilege

The origin of hereditary village leadership in southern Mexico is described by Clark and Blake (1994) as an accidental consequence of self-aggrandizing individuals pursuing personal fame through competitive acts designed to entice followers, clients, and other hang-ons to their groups. As framed, the aggrandizer model of competitive generosity is economic and political; it assumes that aggrandizers and their activities were focal points of social and political change that material concerns were central to the process. Aggrandizers amassed and deployed resources in self-serving ways that obligated and indebted followers—that is, they marshaled resources to create liens on the future labor of those accepting their favors. Aggrandizers’ stratagems privileged activities that might bring in the lion’s share of resources, greater renown, or bind clients to them for future considerations.

As described, the ballgame would have provided numerous opportunities for winning and losing resources or for creating future obligations among one’s associates, either through gambling, gaming, feasting, or sponsorship of the event. Any explanations stressing material gains from the ballgame, however, merely extend the aggrandizer model and the field of activities that led to differential wealth and prestige. We believe the ballgame did play a critical role in the development of formal government, but one quite apart from any competitive materialism. We suspect that one totally unanticipated and salient effect of organizing team sports among a network of egalitarian Mesoamerican villages some 3,600 years ago was the emergence of community identities, or communistic, and of community representatives or leaders. Coupled with other aggrandizer activities, the emerging notion of “our community” and shared interests laid the basis for ascribed leadership among chiefdom societies.

We do not know, and cannot know for certain, of course, the details of the historic circumstances that led to the first formalized governments in early Mesoamerica. Discussion of these critical matters must necessarily be speculative. In the remainder of this essay we explore the possibility that the ballgame was integral to the origins of government in Mesoamerica, and we explore four possible ways in which it might have had a catalytic impact in the competitive egalitarian setting imagined. These include considerations of gambling, participation in the game, sponsorship of the game and its associated activities, and the effects of team sports on community identities.

Given the archaeological problem at hand, there are clear logical parameters for the activities and agents that may have made a difference. By definition, we are dealing with egalitarian society and a transition to hereditary inequality and government. Activities of primary interest, therefore, should meet at least three requirements that such a process implies. First, the activities in question must have the ability to confer some substantive benefits or advantage on a select segment of the population; differential hereditary privilege arises from prior achievements of some sort. Second, the unequal distribution of benefits must not be socially divisive in the egalitarian setting; the ideal benefits would be those that could be shared with others of the community, at least in part, thereby fostering social beliefs of a win-win situation. Third, the benefits and privileges derived from such activities must have the potential to become chronic and, indeed, must become so over time, perhaps a generation or two. Social habituation of persistent differences in achieved statuses would be the first, and most important, step toward change in social perceptions about the nature of society and the inherent status of various persons (Clark 2000). Explanations of the origins of hereditary privilege must account for shifts in social beliefs as well as the distribution of privileges. Given the egalitarian tribal milieu imagined for early Mesoamerica, naked power and coercion would not have constituted viable paths to perdurable political power (see Clark and Blake 1994). But in an interesting way, the ballgame may have provided a formalized setting for acceptable intersocietal aggression that may have channeled aggression to productive ends.

In the following discussion we designate various possible paths to power and privilege with agentic labels such as “sponsor,” “ballplayer,” and “gambler.” These are meant to highlight activities and social roles rather than provide stereotypes of past agents. Clearly, one individual could have engaged in all these activities. Also, the known role of “aggrandizer” is not exclusive to those proposed here. We suspect that aggrandizers were sponsors, players, and gamblers involved in ballgame events and associated activities. All these labels refer to competitive activities, albeit at differing social scales, as we describe in the following sections.
Gambling

For all its pageantry, blood, and bruises, the one aspect of the Aztec ballgame that captured the imagination of the early Spanish clerics was the side bets. As narrated by Durán, disproportionate resources were wagered on outcomes of games. Bettors were not confined to the elite class; commoners were allowed equal access to chances of easy wealth or personal ruin. In truth, debt was no respecter of persons in ancient Mesoamerica. Among the Aztecs, formal rules tantamount to laws provided for the payment of sums won or lost. Occasionally, wagers were made that exceeded the economic wherewithal of the bettor, and sempiternal servitude awaited him should he bet on the wrong colors.

As inherently titillating as these data for the Aztecs might be to clerics, they are of questionable relevance for the early Mesoamerican case of rank origins, coming as they do from a situation of traditional stratified societies. Of greater potential importance would be information from tribal societies. Fortunately, there is a wealth of such data on gaming for North and South American tribal societies that confirm the link between gambling and gaming seen in late Mesoamerica. We consider briefly a few select cases from this larger sample before turning to some of the implications of gambling for the origins of rank in early Mesoamerica.

Gambling was an integral component of nearly all tribal and rank societies, and it continues to form an important economic and social lifeline for many native communities (Gabriel 1996). As Kathryn Gabriel (1996:17) observes, “Native American traditions abound with myths and legends that reveal the sacred significance of gambling and the divine origin, power, and symbolism of these games.” Information from Amerindian societies illustrates gambling’s remarkable power to precipitate short-term social change. Anthropologists working in the Amazon Basin observed that gambling was commonplace, recording that “they played not merely for the fun of the game but to win substantial stakes,” the wagers consisting of “baskets of maize, strings of glass beads, and, when necessary, everything the players had in their houses” (Cooper 1949:514). Players as well as spectators engaged in betting.

Ballgames enjoyed widespread popularity throughout North America but generally not within formal ballcourts as in Mesoamerica. In the latter part of the 19th century, George Catlin observed the Choctaw playing a ballgame at an astronomical scale. “It is no uncommon occurrence for six or eight hundred or a thousand of these young men to engage in a game of ball, with five or six times that number of spectators, of men, women, and children surrounding the ground, looking on” (Catlin 1953:290, emphasis added). Even compensating for exaggeration, the number of players is impressive and would have required an extremely large playing field. As in the South American examples, bets were placed prior to the game and held “in trust” by a third party until the game was completed. Although Catlin does not elaborate on outcomes of this gambling, the total goods wagered must have been substantial. The often violent determination of the players to score accentuates the nature of the stakes.

Stern (1950:84) reported that among the Acaxee of Nayarat, Mexico, large bets were integral to the ballgame. Stakes rose even higher for intercommunity games, though they still tended to be limited to personal property. A challenge by one village could not be refused by another. A messenger was sent to collect wagered articles, usually of equal value to those put up by the challengers. A “consolation prize” was awarded to the losing team unless they were the host team. If the host team won, everyone dined on a luxurious feast. However, if they lost, the hosts did not share their feast with the victors who had just made off with their possessions (Stern 1950:84).

Status could be greatly enhanced, or lowered, through gambling (Scarborough 1991:142). Among the Gros Ventre of Montana, for example, gambling was a means of social mobility (Flannery and Cooper 1946:398). Most gambling centered around a wheel game that required skill and dexterity. Supporters of competing players would often provide food for spectators and boast of their ability to cater the event. Reports show that social ambition could be snuffed out by a single bad day of gambling. White Owl, an older man of great standing among the Gros Ventre, was challenged to a wheel game by Lame Bull, an ambitious young upstart. So confident was Lame Bull of victory that he bet all his possessions and those of his wife and select relatives. The social stakes were even higher. A loss by White Owl would have meant his downfall; a win would make him even bigger in the eyes of his followers. Lame Bull lost the contest and all his possessions and became an object of ridicule to his family and former followers. Although White Owl gained numerous possessions in the contest, of greater importance was maintenance of his prestige.

Inevitably, gambling also led to serious conflicts. The Gros Ventre solved the most extreme conflicts by fissioning from the main group, which they were free to do at any time (Flannery and Cooper 1946:411). Gambling stakes seem to have been largest between rival bands. To prevent rivalries from destroying the social fabric, gambling was prohibited among ritual specialists and between certain kin relations (both fictive and sanguine). In Flannery and Cooper’s (1946:415) list of gambling rules among Plains groups, the two overarching principles that emerge are (1) a prohibition of gambling between close relatives, and (2) its encouragement between rival groups. It is as if gambling were the quintessential means to effect Sahlin’s (1972) version of negative reciprocity, the gaming version of “buying cheap and selling dear.” Clearly, gambling provided
an effective means of getting nearby villages or commu-
nities to interact with each other in competitive ways. Taboos
against gambling with relatives channeled its power to-
ward rivals, thus ensuring that victorious gamblers would
not accumulate wealth on the backs of their families. As
one perspicacious informant put it, gambling within the
family would be “like winning [property] from yourself”
(Flannery and Cooper 1946:414).

Gambling power is a recurrent theme in tribal narratives.
Some narratives attest to help from deceased ancestors
(Flaskerud 1961:92) who brought success in gambling. In
some societies, gambling is so powerful that it is thought to
interfere with or threaten other powers and, therefore, must
be controlled (Flannery and Cooper 1946:407). Few stud-
ies address the subject in any detail, however. A relatively
unexplored component of this line of thought is the psy-
cology of gambling and its effects on prehistoric socie-
ties. Did gambling and the associated debts incurred inten-
sify existing inequalities and intercommunity rivalries?

Many more examples of gambling among tribal socie-
ties could be added; however, the few mentioned suffice
to make several fundamental points. Gambling on ball-
games and other games was widespread in the Americas
and was engaged in for fun, profit, and prestige. Almost
anything, and sometimes everything, could be wagered.
Gambling of personal property was common and, among
more complex societies, wagering of human labor for fu-
ture considerations occurred. Gambling is widely acknow-
ledged as a powerful activity, with an inherent power to
elevate and debase those who engage in it. Moreover, its
social divisive powers are well attested.

The conditions of possibility for gambling involve rules
and protocols concerning bets, collections on bets, and
challenges to games. Lady luck is also a pervasive theme,
with some gambling successes attributed to one’s super-
natural connections. In many encounters, especially those
with high stakes, wealth, prestige, and social good will
were all on the line. Gambling was therefore an important
means for a diverse range of societies to reconcile a divine
plan with the random events of everyday life (Gabriel
1996).

Granting all of the above for sake of argument, is there a
plausible link between the power of gambling, wealth ac-
cumulation, and the transformation of egalitarian society?
On basic principles we suspect not. Given its pervasive-
ness in societies of all types, gambling may be a cultural
universal and thus of dubious explanatory power. It is
clearly a means of wealth redistribution and, secondarily, a
means to gain greater prestige, both of which are probably
important but not critical in social transformation. Gam-
bling comes equipped with its own social-leveling mecha-
nism, and unless one can rig the game, it would seem that
in habitual gambling, wins and losses would eventually
level out. So prospects of large material gains from betting
over the long run appear few.

Perhaps of greater importance than gambling winnings
are gambling debts. Those who bet and lose more than they
possess must be re-possessed themselves. In some social
circumstances, the ability to command the labor of such
witches for personal ends may have been important or
even critical in the more general processes of debt manage-
ment. A particularly apt way to obligate a follower would
be to cover his gambling losses. The potential for gambling
to create debts is obvious. Less clear are the long-term ef-
effects of such activity on the general social fabric and egal-
tarian ethos.

Gaming

The analytical distinction between the social effects of
gaming and gambling is somewhat forced as the two ap-
pear to be sides of the same coin. In some of the personal
and intercommunity rivalries mentioned above, playing a
game was just the excuse to force a heavy wager on a rival
that could not be refused without loss of face. Whereas
 gambling appears inherently to concern material gains and
consequences of significant wins or losses, gaming relates
more to social prestige. In the Aztec and Gros Ventre ex-
amples, challenge to a game appears to have carried the so-
cial force of a personal duel and involved the honor of
one’s name, as based in one’s sports prowess. It is obvious
that demonstrable high levels of sports skill and physical
ability would carry prestige in most societies, but it is not
clear how this could be parlayed into other long-term
benefits.

In today’s world, the association of sports prowess with
success is synonymous with wealth, renown, and potential
political power. Evidence from late Mesoamerica also in-
dicates that some of these relationships between sports, re-
nown, wealth, and power may be premodern. It is well to
remember, however, that much of the linkage depends on
the prior existence of societies based upon social stratifica-
tion, monetary systems, and market economies. In the Az-
tec case, players were born to high privilege and do not ap-
pear to have won it through sporting victories. In fact, their
privileged station was a necessary precondition for learn-
ing the sport in the first place because the ballgame was an
elite activity. What benefits might derive from gaming and
athletic skill in an egalitarian setting? The most obvious
ones suggested by the Mesoamerican data are renown and
wealth. But by themselves these seem rather unidimen-
sional, and it is hard to imagine a scenario in which a
sport’s hero in an egalitarian milieu could leverage renown
from sporting successes into hereditary benefits for his off-
spring. Also, the wealth actually won in playing the game
would have been meager compared to potential gains from
side-bets. Absent gambling winnings, the tangible remu-
nerations from ballgame victories were rather insignificant.

The very nature of physical sports ties success on the field
to biological parameters of strength, speed, coordination,
and the like. The reality of sports is that the aging process eventually defeats all comers; one cannot forever prevail against younger rivals. In a sense, any prestige or wealth gained through successful sporting activity is likely to follow the life-cycle trajectory thought to apply to New Guinea Bigmen. No matter their fame, they cannot sustain their successes indefinitely because age and fatigue eventually catch up with them.

Several examples discussed above suggest that one benefit of gaming was the possibility of humiliating one’s rivals on the field of play. This may have been an especially important benefit in the types of competitive egalitarian or bigman systems thought to be characteristic of early Mesoamerica. Competitive sports also occurred between rival communities. In this light, it is of interest that several scholars have suggested that ballgames as surrogates for costly warfare between competing polities (Fox 1991:227–228; Taladoire and Colsenet 1991). While true for late Mesoamerican societies, for our question it is more interesting to consider ballgames as a form of competition possibly analogous to warfare among New Guinea societies (see Wiessner and Tumu 1998). Although interpretations drawn from such analogies must be tentative, there was a strong link from the very beginning in Mesoamerican symbolism between militarism and the ballgame (Taladoire and Colsenet 1991:174). Competition between rival communities, in the form of ballgames, probably involved formal and informal rules of compensation.

Other interesting implications follow from possible consequences of the physical contest itself. If a player were killed or seriously injured in a ballgame, his death or injury may have required compensation to his close kin. Depending on compensation rules, such wealth transfers could have been of greater importance than any gambling winnings because they would have had longer term consequences. In New Guinea, compensation payments implicate formal systems of wealth valuables, and their payment is generally the first step in establishing long term exchange relationships between parties (see Hayden 1995).

Perhaps the most important outcome of ballgames involved aspects of social knowledge, norms, and values. One of the clear outcomes of contests of physical prowess and skill could be, or would be, changes in social valuations of persons. The transition from egalitarian to rank systems essentially makes such disparate valuations permanent. So with all of their material gains, changes in social perceptions of individual worth would have been equally important. Information from the Maya area suggests one way in which the phenomenology of the ballgame may have been promoted in the emergence of ascribed leadership. Linda Schele (in Freidel et al. 1993) argued that ballgames in the Classic period (ca. A.D. 250–900) were contests of mortals against gods, with gods being represented by mortals. Such contests involved deceased ancestors who then “played” the game vicariously through living offspring. So perceived, victory in these matches signaled supernatural favor and, perhaps of greater importance, the efficacy of one’s ancestors in mortal affairs compared to others’ ancestors. By such simple means, players and/or their sponsors garnered greater prestige and higher status for themselves as well as their ancestors through successful play in the ballgame.

Links to apotheosized ancestors and sublime supernatural favor are widely sought these days as the most convincing way to have affected the transition from egalitarian to non-egalitarian social structures (see Friedman and Rowlands 1977; Marcus and Flannery 1996; McAnany 1995). Ballgame successes provide a compelling logic for such a link. However, it is worth pointing out in this regard that, given certain beliefs about connections between the living and the gods, success in any socially esteemed endeavor would do, including gambling, farming, weaving, hunting, fishing, and so forth. As with the accumulation of material resources, the accumulation of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1977, 1990) and social prestige appears to have been an important ingredient, but insufficient by itself. All paths to potential heritable power have the possibility of differential control of material goods, but these required investment and manipulation in particular ways to defeat the egalitarian system.

Sponsoring

Permanent architectural facilities such as ballcourts had multiple options for investment, first through their construction, which had their own managerial imperatives (Hill 1999), and subsequently through their maintenance and expansion. Ballcourt sponsorship could have taken several forms: coordination of initial construction and provision of labor, meals, building materials, ritual specialists, dedicatory feasts, and/or players. Underwriting construction of a ballcourt would have given aggrandizers a means of expanding their influence locally and regionally, while simultaneously debasing competitors who could not finance such endeavors.

Sponsorship may have conferred ownership in some instances. Ownership of the ballcourt and/or playing gear, or sponsorship of games and their associated activities, especially rituals, feasting, and gambling, would both have opened promising possibilities for long-term benefits. Depending on one’s theoretical leanings, private ownership of the Paso de la Amada ballcourt or critical ballgame equipment provides a best or worst case scenario for the origins of rank based upon private property. There are many variants of such arguments going back to the Enlightenment, but they all involve control or monopoly of a critical resource that others want or need so badly that they willingly submit to the lucky soul who controls them. Ownership of the Paso de la Amada ballcourt, however, appears an unlikely
candidate for such an explanation because it can hardly be construed as a necessity, and other ballcourts certainly could have been constructed just as easily as it was. All private property routes to rank involve some form of rent of material and social benefits that owners extract from users. We doubt that ownership of a sports arena in a tribal setting would have had such consequences.

The nagging question raised by discovery of the early earthen ballcourt at Paso de la Amada is whether or not the household at Mound 6 was responsible for its construction and use. We suspect so. Construction of the elevated Mound 6 house followed close on the heels of the construction of the ballcourt, so correlation in this instance is sufficient probable cause to consider individual sponsorship of this facility. Aggrandizers sought opportunities to demonstrate their magnificence, and sponsorship of a ballcourt would have been a grand way to do so. Sponsorship allowed aggrandizers to deploy resources, many of them perishable, and to put them into the hands of followers, with a promissory for later returns. Even excluding any material returns from extracting rents from use of the facility, management and control of the court would have brought important benefits in terms of wealth creation, debt management, and personal renown.

The presence of just one ballcourt in a region, of course, is as illogical as wearing only one shoe. Consequently, we expect that other large villages in the Mazatan region also had ballcourts and that village teams played "away-games" as they did in later times. If correct, the broader question concerns construction of several ballcourts and the organization and consequences of intervillage competition. If scheduling of ballgames were tied to maintenance of ballcourts, then aggrandizers who sponsored their construction and controlled use-rights could have bolstered personal prestige by successes in the ballcourt arena, qua players, gamblers, and/or sponsors.

As architectural facilities, ballcourts provided permanent loci for games and rituals connected with specific sponsors. Although there is no shortage of modern examples of sponsor aggrandizement, the one we imagine was small in scale, probably confined to the Mazatan region. The permanence of ballcourts created new opportunities for competitive interaction for subsequent generations by connecting players, sponsors, and participants in long-term relationships. Each time a ballgame was played, these connections would have been reinforced in the minds of participants and spectators. We suggest these connections were habitual in nature and eventually turned to the social advantage of those most closely associated with the ballcourt.

**The Ballgame, Communitas, and First Government**

The most consequential phenomenon resulting from the construction and use of the Paso de la Amada ballcourt may have been wholly unintended and had little to do with tangible material benefits, as great as these could have been; rather, it may have entailed new perceptions of community identity and related identities. In advancing this argument, we presume that ballplaying was inherently competitive and involved numerous teams within the Mazatan region. Further, we postulate that the formal construction of the ballcourt at Paso de la Amada coincided with construction of other courts at other villages, formation of village teams, and intervillage competition among teams, each sponsored by one or more aggrandizers. The village cluster at Paso de la Amada was large enough to have sponsored several teams; we suspect that, initially, competition among teams at Paso de la Amada may have been as intense and divisive as that among teams from different villages. Construction of a more formal facility at Paso de la Amada, however, appears to have changed matters significantly and to have promoted intravillage cooperation under the banner of a single village team.

We cannot resurrect the pageantry surrounding these early games, but what is known from later times indicates that games would have been highly charged affairs, ranging from sublimated warfare between villages to carnivals of fun, food, gambling, and hospitality. Indeed, ballgames were inherently social affairs and would have been obvious activities meriting aggrandizer sponsorship. Ballgames and their collateral activities provided numerous opportunities to deploy perishable resources and to be magnanimous to one’s relatives, neighbors, and friends, and this would have been sufficient motivation for aggrandizers to stay involved.

Of special interest to us, however, is a probable consequence of league play among different villages. The emotions and excitement surrounding competitive matches would have promoted a mutual association of teams, sponsors, and villages that culminated over time in a shifting sense in the region of "we" versus "they" that had not been present before. Just as modern collegiate athletes easily fosters esprit de corps and polarizations of loyalties around school colors, we think that competitive team sports led to a polarization of team loyalties, village loyalties, and a heightened sense of belonging to a community. We call this sense of community identity *communitas*. We do not use this term to signal antistructure and intersubjective egalitarianism, as does Victor Turner (1969). Rather, it denotes a social perception among village coresidents of a common sense of belonging to the same community, a sense that cross-cuts lineage loyalties.

Prior to construction of the formal ballcourt at Paso de la Amada, the internal evidence of the residence patterns for this site shows the presence of replicated residential units, or wards. Analytically, we see this as a village cluster of residences with no clear evidence of village-level integration. This changed soon after the construction of the ballcourt and the special residence at Mound 6. The entire Paso
de la Amada village cluster appears to have become an integrated community. We suspect any growing sense of solidarity or communitas was largely an outgrowth of support for the village team and related activities. More importantly, this sense of community identity would logically have implicated a titular community head, a visible personification. In all the various activities involved with scheduling and sponsoring ballgame events, the team sponsor qua manager would have been seen by outsiders from other participating villages as the team and village representative. These external identities folded back into internal perceptions among one’s coreidents, and the titular leader became viewed as such by foreigners and friends alike. These notions of village leader only strengthened the prestige of the agrandizers in each village who sponsored the teams.

The emerging sense of community identity and embodiment of community leadership did not lead automatically from achieved to ascribed leadership, but we think it was an important piece of the puzzle that we have been slow to appreciate. In previous speculations on this matter, we began with a presumption of community solidarity and integration; this was inappropriate. Communitas arose from a complicated process of intervillage interaction; the obverse of this same process of emerging identities saw the association of sports teams with particular villages and of team sponsors as the embodiments of these same entities. With such perceptions in place, and with chronic disparities in responsibilities and perks, leadership roles created and filled by agrandizers could have been amplified and passed on to heirs. If this were the case, formal government based upon hereditary rulership is one probable outcome of changing notions of communitas in Early Formative Mesoamerica.

Concluding Remarks

Throughout our discussion of the early Mesoamerican case we have been lax in separating anthropological concerns from traditional philosophical and political science ones. Our title alludes to traditional social contract theory for consensual government going back to Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and the Mayflower Compact of the original Plymouth colony, but in our detailed arguments we considered the minimal level of government as that corresponding to simple chiefdoms (Service 1962), or the beginnings of hereditary rulership. Simple chiefdoms governed by hereditary chieftains probably fall short of the base level of civitas considered by early political thinkers. Therefore, possible disparities between categorical levels and disciplinary concerns here raise an important reservation about our proposal.

Our argument is historical and relies on getting right the absolute and relative sequence of events and practices. If we have misidentified the critical juncture for the crystallization of formal government, then our discussion of the critical events leading up to it is necessarily suspect. We argued that primitive government, or simple chiefdom societies, emerged in the Mazatan region of southern Mexico about 1600 B.C. To our knowledge, this currently would make it the oldest formal government in the Americas—but we anticipate older evidence will eventually be attested in coastal Ecuador and Peru. Given the vagaries of archaeological evidence and ground truthing, however, it is possible that we may have underestimated the Mesoamerican case. But it is unlikely that we would be off by more than a century. Even allowing such a margin of error, the ballcourt at Paso de la Amada was constructed very near the emergence of chiefdom societies in this region, either just before or just after. In either eventuality, this monumental construction activity, and the subsequent use of the facility, was tied to early government. It either aided in the initial emergence of government or in sustaining the new government through its first and most difficult years. The reality of the ballcourt and its timing are firmly established. Given the timing of the emergence of chiefdom societies, the presumption that the ballcourt/ballgame was integral to the development of first government appears to be a reasonable one.

Based on information of the Mesoamerican ballgame from later periods, and of gaming among American tribal societies, we explored three possible paths to power and prestige that may have arisen through gambling, gaming, and ballgame sponsorship. Of course, the specific connections and their effects are unknowable, but manifold logistical possibilities are entailed in such practices. Here we considered only the most plausible. The numerous ways in which individuals could gain some chronic material or social advantage over others are all compatible with the agrandizer model proposed by Clark and Blake (1994). Our discussion suggests that this model is too materialist and political because it shortchanges the phenomenological side of cultural practices. We argue that nonmaterial outcomes from ballgame sponsorship may have been as important as material ones in the development of hereditary rulership.

As a new or modified cultural practice, the arrangement and promotion of intervillage ballgame competitions in early Mesoamerica may have been critical in changing perceptions of individual and group identity. Arising from basic fanatical spectator behavior, a sense of communitas may have emerged about the same time as the novel practice of recruiting village leaders from the descendants of previously successful tribal headmen. The transition from egalitarian lifeways to those based upon such hereditary distinctions was sustained by chronic disparities in privilege—both material and ideal—that led to habitual practices of inequality. We think the promotion of team sports had a significant impact on the accumulation of resources.
and debt management as well as on shifts in social valuations of various categories of persons. These possible connections certainly merit more research for the Mesoamerican case. The impact of competitive sports on early governments might also be worth investigating in other world areas.

In conclusion, we stress the need to consider sports and other social competition in terms of changing notions of personhood and community identity in tribal and transegalitarian societies. The large scale of investment in formal competitive games and gaming facilities in known tribal societies is sufficient grounds for suspecting that such activities are critical to social reproduction and, therefore, worthy of analytical attention. How were such endeavors financed in the past, and what kinds of tangible and intangible benefits were derived therefrom? In the Mesoamerican case, the unintended and unanticipated consequences of sports competitions may well have been more formal government and new perceptions of identity.

**Notes**

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